

## ***The Role of Behavioural Activation and Inhibition in Advertising Appeals***

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### ***Abstract***

Advertising appeals are central to the effectiveness of advertising and have been studied extensively. However, past research has focused primarily on examining the effects of one or another type of appeal on consumers, and little is known about the concept of an advertising appeal itself. As part of a broader program intended to address this gap, this paper examines the role of underlying motivational forces in the development of consumer attributions regarding advertising appeals. More specifically, we are centrally concerned with examining under what conditions emotion states, personality traits, and underlying motivations may lead to product judgements and subsequent (purchase) behaviour.

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# **The Role of Behavioural Activation and Inhibition in Advertising Appeals**

## **Introduction**

One can reasonably assume that consumer motivations have been at least an implicit aspect of commerce from its very beginning. In the marketing literature, explicit references to appeals in advertising, which are intended to motivate consumers to purchase, can be traced back to the early 1940s (Wheeler, 1943) in the case of war savings bonds, where 'selfish' vs. 'patriotic' appeals were debated. The literature first equated appeals to underlying motivations with the concept of 'drive' (Miller, 1950), consistent with early needs theories (i.e., one is motivated to purchase by the drive to satisfy a need). Beyond the primary driver of human needs, individual differences have always been thought to play an important role in the communication of advertising appeals. However, despite a rich research history in this area, more underlying systems of motivation have only recently been linked to appeals (e.g., Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Dillard & Peck, 2001; Kramer & Yoon, 2007), and this theorizing, while laudable, has strayed somewhat from its social psychological and neuropsychological roots. This paper aims to more fully develop and integrate recent advancements in conceptualizations of appeal communication with underlying motivational systems, personality traits, and emotion states in order to create a more comprehensive understanding of how we might begin to systematically unravel what might constitute an 'effective appeal'.

The paper first examines how marketing appeals have been defined and the role of motivation in these definitions, and then moves on to examine the cognitive and affective processes that interact with the stable personality traits of the consumer, emotions states, and social context that combine to create appeal effectiveness, concluding with an outline of future research possibilities in the context of our theory building exercise.

## **Defining Appeals and Links to Motivation**

Perusal of the marketing literature quickly shows a lack of consensus regarding the definition of appeals, leading to fragmentation and confusion in research (see Beetles & Harris, 2005; Bennett & Kottasz, 2001; de Pelsmacker, 1997). Dichter (1949) nicely sets the stage for our theorizing as he highlighted not only the difficulty in defining appeals but also the importance of psychological processes and an explicit connection to the needs theories being developed at that time: "An appeal, a term so common to the vernacular of advertising is really one of the most complex psychological devices. Since most of our actions are governed by our needs and desires, an effective appeal is a convincing promise of satisfaction of these needs" (p. 61). Despite the lack of consistent definitions or operationalizations, motivation has played a significant role in defining appeals (e.g., Lee & Carter, 2005, p. 290, defined an appeal as an advertising element "designed to motivate" consumers to buy). Further, in their seminal book, Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) defined appeals as intended to "arouse motives to accept the opinions recommended in persuasive communications", thus also connecting advertising and communication theory. Past research in human communications makes our inquiry into individual differences in response to appeals particularly salient, since personality predispositions, state emotions, and social context have figured prominently in both fundamental communication research (i.e., message encoding, decoding, feedback, etc.) and individual responses to advertising appeals.

The growing acknowledgement of a difference between the intent of an advertising appeal and its different interpretations are encouraging signs of maturation in the literature (see Pelsmacker & Geuens 1997). The core of this paper is intended to bolster this line of reasoning by adding layers of nuanced theory into the underlying motivations, emotion states, and personality traits that are likely to coalesce in making appeal attributions. At a



more fundamental level, we ask, 'Under what conditions, emotion states, personality traits, and underlying motivations is an appeal likely to lead to product judgements (attributions) and subsequent behaviour?' In so doing, we fully concur with Dillard and Peck (2001) that what we need to better understand is the nuances of psychological functioning that occur between the observation of an appeal and any kind of behavioural intention.

### **Underlying Motivational Systems**

Motivation sits comfortably at the nexus between the appeal and whether or not it actually translates into attributions or behaviours in the individual consumer. We now examine the underlying motivational systems that help to inform the question, 'Under what conditions might an advertising appeal be perceived as effective?' While the antecedents of motivation and its effects on behaviour have been studied extensively in management, comparatively little attention has been paid to advances in neuroscience and the growing understanding of the physiological underpinnings of motivation. Specifically, Gray's (1987) theory of emotion separates appetitive and aversive motivational systems, referred to as the behavioural activation system (BAS) and behavioural inhibition system (BIS), respectively. Below we examine these central constructs and discuss their connection with stable personality traits. Only very recent writing has examined BIS/BAS in terms of its links to information processing in consumer behaviour (e.g., Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Dillard & Peck, 2001; Kramer & Yoon, 2007). Our aim is to fill a void in the literature, and explore implications for marketing research and practice, by providing a stronger theoretical grounding for Gray's (1987) theory of relatively stable underlying motivational systems and their intricate relationship with personality traits, emotion states, and advertising appeals.

The BAS activates behaviour in response to signals of reward, whereas the BIS stimulates behaviour in response to signals of punishment and threat (Gable, Reis & Elliot, 2000; Gray, 1987) and is intended to keep the organism out of trouble (Watson, Wiese, Vaidya & Tellegen, 1999). Gray (1987) called the BIS a "stop, look, and listen system" to emphasize how it redirects attention toward the environment, and may also trigger the 'fight or flight' reaction to threatening stimuli. In contrast, the BAS is an appetitive system of behavioural approach that leads organisms towards situations and experiences that potentially may yield pleasure and reward. The basic adaptive function of BAS is to ensure organisms obtain resources (e.g., food, shelter, companionship) that are essential to both the survival of the individual and the species (Watson et al., 1999).

Positive and negative affect (PA and NA) represent the subjective components of the broader biobehavioural systems of approach and withdrawal, respectively, and have been consistently linked with the underlying motivational systems of BAS and BIS. Most notably, the Big 5 trait of extraversion has been associated with the BAS, as extraverts tend to be more outgoing and sociable (and thus respond more intensely and frequently to potential reward cues – e.g., a beer commercial focusing on a social gathering of friends). In contrast, the trait of neuroticism has been associated with the BIS, as neurotic individuals tend to worry and thus respond more intensely and frequently to potential punishment cues in the environment (e.g., a fear appeal stressing the high cancer risk from smoking – see Leventhal & Singer, 1966). However, the marketing literature has not fully explored the implications of the finding that BIS magnifies negative stimuli (Gable, Reis & Elliot, 2000), and may thereby reduce the effectiveness of threat-recommendation appeals in individuals with a highly sensitive BIS.

The BIS/BAS systems have demonstrated strong predictive validity in self-report studies, and the BIS/BAS scale (Carver & White, 1994) has also shown strong covariation with resting prefrontal asymmetrical measurements using electroencephalographic (EEG) technology (see Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997; Sutton & Davidson, 1997). Research evidence supports both the neurobiological grounding (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997) and the functional



independence of BIS and BAS (e.g., Rusting & Larsen, 1998). Respectively, resting levels of right versus left frontal activation reflect BIS and NA versus BAS and PA (Sutton & Davidson, 1997). Tomarken and Keener (1998, p. 403) concluded that, "these lateralized systems not only influence approach and withdrawal but also the positive and negative emotions that are often linked with approach and withdrawal". This is germane to the current paper since we are interested not only in BIS/BAS, but also in how and why emotions associated with these aversive and appetitive systems may change over time, within and between persons, depending upon the stimulus (appeal and context). The functional independence of BIS/BAS suggests that these constructs are related, yet orthogonal. That is, all individuals have a BIS and BAS, yet each is triggered by independent stimuli and serve very different functions. Neurobiological evidence strongly suggests that our BIS/BAS systems are quite stable (see Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997), yet the degree to which BIS/BAS are innate or socialized is not clear. The point to emphasize here is that BIS and BAS are functionally independent and are activated by different types of stimuli.

Two principal hypotheses have been suggested to explain the BIS/BAS links to behavioural outcomes: differential exposure and differential reactivity (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). The first hypothesis posits that BIS/BAS may influence tendencies to experience certain types of events. For example, people high in BIS may actually experience more negative events (linked to their high NA and neuroticism) than others. In contrast, differential reactivity suggests that people with high BIS/BAS may react more strongly to negative vs. positive daily events, respectively. This second hypothesis is premised on the notion that people experience largely the same number of positive and negative daily events and it's how they react to them that distinguishes them in BIS/BAS terms. By comparison, the differential exposure hypothesis is based on the notion that personality characteristics "colour" our daily experiences, that is, people high in BIS/BAS create more negative/positive daily events in their lives. We contend that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. That is, one may place one's self in positions that are more personality congruent (e.g., an extravert going out to a bar), consistent with differential exposure, and that same person may react to events (e.g., meeting new people) in very different ways, consistent with differential reactivity.

### **Traits, States and Advertising Appeals**

The mind of the consumer is the central aspect of marketing appeals, yet it is arguably too often overlooked or it's functioning assumed. Personality and emotions help to explain why people may come to different appeal attributions and potentially purchase behaviours, given the same objective situation (or context). Personality refers to the stable differences between people consisting of both cognitive and emotional aspects.

The appraisal theory of emotions focuses on the cognitive antecedents of emotional experience (e.g., Oatley, 1992), and suggests that negative emotions arise from the appraisal that the environment is incongruent with individual goals and that positive emotions follow the appraisal of compatibility between goals and environment (Baggozi, 1997). While fear appeals have seen the most research and theorizing (e.g., Hale & Dillard, 1994), the notion that state emotions will be aroused to the extent that individuals perceive the stimulus to be important, highly valenced, and impending can be extended to positive emotions. The point to emphasize is that it is the emotional intensity, from this perspective, that is persuasive.

Differences in motivational systems have considerable impact on individual strategies for goal attainment, which, in turn, are likely to influence focus of attention. This line of reasoning is consistent with self-regulatory theory (Higgins, 1997) as the dominant system through which people approach pleasure and avoid pain. While Gray's (1987) BIS/BAS theory has arguably more evidence of predictive validity, both theories suggest that differences in goal



attainment strategies may lead to different foci of attention, and hence, differential reliance on internal versus external information. In addition, Carver and Scheier's (1999) control theory of behaviour is arguably the most explicit in its treatment of affect dynamics. It posits that negative/positive affect ensues when individuals' progress towards attaining their goals is less/more than expected. These researchers argue that while there is both a cognitive monitoring system that assesses progress toward or away from goals, and a meta-monitoring system that simultaneously evaluates the direction and rate of progress, it is the latter that is responsible for the production of affect. Thus, upward changes in emotion may play the strongest role in appeals rather than peak emotion (see Dillard & Anderson, 2004).

Combining personality's strong emotion links with Bower's (1981) network theory of affect provides a rationale for predicting personality congruent cognition (Clark & Teasdale, 1985; Rusting, 1999). That is, extraversion/neuroticism may predict positive/negative appeal judgement biases. In addition to propensities toward more intense emotions in situations, part of extraversion and neuroticism may be the cognitive structures that develop over a lifetime of positive and negative emotional experiences (Rusting, 1999). Such differences could produce interpretation and appeal attribution biases over and above momentary emotion states (Rusting & Larsen, 1998; Zelenski & Larsen, 2002). In other words, extraversion and neuroticism include more elaborated positive and negative emotion nodes respectively, and thus predict the probability of experiencing emotion, and the extent to which emotion states influence appeal attributions.

Another framework popular in the affect-congruent literature is the affect as information approach (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), and it too has been extended to personality differences in attributions. In this view, emotions can provide information that can be useful in making appeal attributions – to the extent that the emotion is perceived as relevant to the evaluation, it cues processing in an affect-congruent direction. This assumes that a consumer who is exposed to an appeal makes a basic attribution, e.g., 'How do I feel about the appeal?' (Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 1988), and depending upon the valence associated with the response to such a basic question, he or she may use that emotion as a cue toward more complex attributions. However, beyond some threshold level of arousal required for an emotion to influence persuasion, the impact of emotion is not a simple function of affect intensity (Dillard & Peck, 2001). In sum, the affect as information approach can play a powerful role in cognitive functioning depending upon the valence associated with the state emotion(s).

### **Summary and Implications**

Extending the logic from the appraisal theory of emotions, messages need to be broken down into their constituent parts to assess how the full range of elicited emotion might lead to attributions and behaviour. As noted by Dillard & Anderson (2004, p. 923), "evaluating the message as a whole obscures the fact that persuasive advocacies are constructed from a variety of components and that each of these components might have a unique impact on emotion." Message component research designs (e.g., Dillard & Meijnders, 2002) with emotional change measures as predictors of persuasion offer useful insights into what elicits emotional reactions and the influence of manipulating those emotions in an appeal.

Most any theory of persuasion would show a process that starts with appeal exposure and ends with attitudes/attributions or behaviour (a tenuous chain at best). While we have established that cognitions and emotions are causal antecedents of appeal attributions, we have refined this line of inquiry to examine appeal effectiveness, or more specifically to reposition the question as 'perceived to be effective for whom and under what circumstances?' This contributes to the literature by examining the individual characteristics on which appeal effectiveness attributions are made. We argue that categorizing advertising



appeals strategies in terms of broad positive or negative categories is suboptimal since it does not adequately capture the rich individual differences in emotion states and traits or the constituent parts of any appeal.

Individual differences in personality are clearly important in considering emotion and appeal attributions. Dispositions (either at the level of trait affectivity or broader motivational systems) describe propensities to experience more frequent and intense emotion states. Emotion-related individual differences seem to include cognitive processing biases, and these processes often involve the way people use affective information in making appeal attributions. Advertising appeals provide a context to uncover patterns of relating, nuances in current theory, and the exciting possibility of uncovering new ways in which personality and emotion combine to influence cognitive attributions about what is being advertised. We would strongly advocate for emotions to not only be measured at multiple points in time (Dillard & Anderson, 2004), but also both within and between subjects (Gable, Reis & Elliot, 2000). That is, appeals are communications acts that need to be broken down into their constituent parts in order to draw more meaningful inferences on the role of state emotions (as mediated by underlying motivational systems) in the creation of potentially multiple attributions, which collectively may or may not lead to the intended behaviour(s). Such research need not be overly intrusive, as recent personality research has utilized sensory technology in real-world settings (biopsychological data on heart-rate, sweat glands, etc.) (e.g., Feldman Barrett, Quigley, Bliss-Morneau & Aronson, 2004) as well as more technologically sophisticated experimental designs involving the assessment of appeals using EEG and MRI technologies. Our approach places the dynamic reality of the consumer brain, and individual differences therein, at the forefront of future research into advertising appeals.

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